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S E R B I A N

B A L L A D S

SERBIAN BALLADS

Translated by
R. W. SETON-WATSON

Price Threepence net

Published for
THE KOSSOVO DAY COMMITTEE

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PREFACE.

The Serbo-Croat race has been famous for its popular poetry ever since Goethe transfused with his genius an Italian Abbé's version of "The Wife of Hassan Aga." But on this side of the Channel translations have been few and far between, and even those which exist have been out of print for a generation. And yet the songs and ballads of the Serb provide the surest clue to the national character and outlook. For during five centuries of Turkish oppression they kept alive the memory of Serbia's lost glories, surrounded the dim figures of her medieval heroes with a halo of romance, and encouraged the faith of a down-trodden people in the certain resurrection to come. A whole cycle of ballads centres round the fatal battle of Kosovo, the "Field of the Blackbirds," on 15th (New Style 28th) June, 1389, at which both the Turkish Sultan Murad and the Serbian Tsar Lazar perished, and which dealt a death-blow to Serbian independence. Equally famous are the ballads which deal with the adventures of Marko Kraljević, the half mythical hero who set himself to defend the oppressed peasantry against Turkish misrule, and who, though at times a vassal of the Sultan, never failed to strike terror into the heart of the Turks. According to one legend Marko and his piebald charger Šarac still sleep in a cavern and await the day on which they are to restore the fortunes of the Serbian race. A great part too play the Uzkoks, the Croat pirates of Northern Dalmatia, whose ranks were continually recruited by the broken men for whom Turkish soil had grown too hot; few ballads can equal in dramatic directness the "Dream of Ivo of Zengg." Finally, the Serbian war of Liberation a hundred years ago inspired a new generation of bards, and the ballads which deal with the exploits of Kara George, Haiduk Velko, Miloš Obrenović and other leaders have the old fire and vivid word-painting of earlier days.

The metre employed is almost invariably decasyllabic and unrhymed, with a caesura in the middle of the line, on either side of which greater varieties of speed and scansion are attainable than in the facile but monotonous rhythms of Scott or Byron. They are meant to be chanted or recited, to the primitive accompaniment of the gusla or one-stringed fiddle; and though they are really untranslatable, I have aimed above all in these very inadequate versions at rendering them suitable for recitation and thus preserving some fair idea of the atmosphere of the original.

5th June, 1916.

R. W. S. W.

SERBIAN BALLADS.

THE BATTLE OF KOSOVO.

Murad camped on the Field of Blackbirds,
And then a letter did he write,
And to the fortress of Kruševac sent it :—
“ To the knees of Lazar, Prince of the Serbs !
“ O Prince Lazar, Head of this land,
“ It never was known, and it never can be,
“ That in one Empire two should rule,
“ And that the lieges should doubly be taxed.
“ We cannot both of us bear the sceptre.
“ Send to *me* then the keys and the taxes.
“ The golden keys of each strong place,
“ And the taxes for seven years.
“ And shouldst thou decline to send them me,
“ Then let us meet on the Field of Blackbirds
“ And with our sabres divide the Empire.”

When Tsar Lazar received this letter,
He read it through and bitterly wept.
Oh if some one could but have listened,
To hear the deep curses of the prince.
“ He who does not come to the Field of Blackbirds.
“ Let nothing prosper in his hands,
“ Neither the gold-white wheat in the field,
“ Nor the vine on the mountain side,
“ Nor the children playing at home.”

Then Tsar Lazar kept his nameday
In the silent fortress of Kruševac.
At his rich table he seated his guests,
All his lords and noble courtiers.
On the right sat the old Jug Bogdan,

At his side the nine Jugović brothers ;
Vuk Branković on his left,
And the other lords in their due order.
But facing him was Miloš seated,
And beside him two Serbian Voivodes—
Ivan Kosačić was the one,
And the other was Milan Toplica.

The Tsar lifted the brimming goblet,
And thus he spake to his noble guests :—
“ To whom shall I quaff the brimming beaker ?
“ If it be age that should decide,
“ Then I must pledge the old Jug Bogdan.
“ If it be rank that should decide it,
“ Then I must drink to Vuk Branković.
“ If I may follow the voice of feeling,
“ Then the cup falls to my wife’s dear brothers,
“ To my wife’s brothers, the nine Jugović.
“ Should manly beauty prescribe my choice,
“ Then the cup is the prize of Kosačić,
“ And if *height* is to decide,
“ Then the cup is Milan Toplica’s.
“ But if hero’s prowess decides my choice,
“ Then I drain it to Miloš the Voivode :
“ To no other may it be pledged.
“ To the health of Milos Obilić !
“ Thy health, O Miloš, loyal and false—
“ First loyal to me and at last to me false.
“ To-morrow thou wilt in battle betray me,
“ Wilt pass over to Murad’s army.
“ Thy health, O Miloš, and drain the beaker :
“ Drink, and keep it as a gift.”

Up to his feet sprang Miloš Obilić,
Then to the black earth down he bowed.
“ Thanks to thee, most gracious Tsar Lazar,
“ My heartfelt thanks to thee for thy toast ;
“ For thy toast and for thy present ;
“ But no thanks for such a speech !
“ For—else may my faith undo me—

“ Never unfaithful have I been,
“ Ne’er have I been, and ne’er shall be.
“ But I am resolved on the field to-morrow
“ For the faith of Christ to give my life.
“ But faithless sits at thy very knee
“ And drinks the wine from his silk-draped glass,
“ He, the accursed, the traitor Branković.
“ On the sacred Vitus-Day to-morrow
“ *We* shall see on the Field of Blackbirds,
“ Who is faithful and who is faithless.
“ But by God the Almighty I swear it—
“ To-morrow I’ll go to the Field of Blackbirds,
“ And there I shall kill the Sultan Murad,
“ And plant my foot upon his throat.
“ Should God and fortune grant to me
“ My safe return to Kruševac,
“ Vuk Branković shall be my captive,
“ And to my warlance I shall bind him,
“ As a woman the flax to her apron,
“ And shall drag him thus to the Field of Blackbirds.”

THE MOTHER OF THE JUGOVIĆ.

Dear God, how great a marvel !
When the army camped on the field of Kosovo,
And in that army nine Jugović brothers,
And the tenth, the old Jug Bogdan.
The mother of the Jugović prays to God,
That He may give her the eyes of a falcon
And the white wings of a swan,
That she may fly to the Plain of Kosovo
And may see the nine Jugović brothers,
And the tenth, the old Jug Bogdan.

As she prayed, her prayer was granted.
God gave her the eyes of a falcon
And the white wings of a swan.
Then she flies to the Plain of Kosovo.
Dead she found the nine Jugović brothers,
And the tenth, the old Jug Bogdan.
And above them, nine spears of battle ;
Perched on the spears, falcons nine ;
Around the spears, nine good steeds ;
And beside them, nine grim lions.
Then did they whinny, the nine good steeds ;
Then did they roar, the nine grim lions ;
Then did they scream, the nine falcons.
E'en then the mother was hard of heart,
And from her heart no tear did rise.

But she takes the nine good steeds,
And she takes the nine grim lions,
And she takes the nine falcons.
Back she turns to her castle white.

From afar her sons' wives saw her :
A little nearer they came to meet her.
There was clamour of nine widows :
There was weeping of nine orphans :
There was neighing of nine good steeds :
There was roaring of nine grim lions :
There was screaming of nine falcons.
E'en then the mother was hard of heart,
And from her heart no tear did rise.

When night was come, and the midnight was there,
Then the grey horse of Damian groaned.
And Damian's mother asked his wife :
" Daughter of mine and wife of Damian,
" What sets the horse of Damian groaning ?
" Can it be hunger for pure white corn ?
" Can it be thirst for water of Zvečan ? "
Then answered the wife of Damian :
" It is not hunger for pure white corn :
" It is not thirst for water of Zvečan.
" It is, that Damian had taught him,
" Till midnight, to feast on hay,
" And after midnight, to take the road.
" Now 'tis his master he is mourning,
" For he will never bear him more."
E'en then the mother was hard of heart,
And from her heart no tear did rise.

When morning came and break of dawn,
There came flying two coal-black ravens.
Bloody were their wings up to the shoulders.
Round their beaks there clung white foam.
And they carried the hand of a hero,
And on the hand a wedding-ring of gold.
They threw it into the mother's lap.

The mother of the Jugović took the hand,
She turned it round, she fondled it,
And then she called the wife of Damian.
" Daughter of mine and wife of Damian,

“ Couldst thou tell whose hand is this ? ”
Then answered the wife of Damian :
“ Mother of mine, O mother of Damian,
“ This is the hand of our own Damian,
“ For I do know the ring, my mother ;
“ At the betrothal I did have it.”
The mother took the hand of Damian,
She turned it round, she fondled it.
Then to the hand she softly spake :
“ O my hand, my fresh green apple,
“ Where didst thou grow, where wert thou plucked ?
“ ’Twas on my bosom thou didst grow.
“ The plucking, ’twas on Kosovo’s plain.”
Speaking, she breathed her soul away.

MARKO KRALJEVIĆ AND THE VILA.

Marko Kraljević rides through the wood,
Rides through the wood and curses it.
"Black wood, black wood, may ill befall thee,
As thirst to-day assaileth me,
Whilst not a drop of water cool
Nor ruddy wine is thine to give.
My Sharatz or my hawk must die,
That their life's blood may slake my thirst."
Then came a voice from out the wood:
"Slay not thy Sharatz, seasoned in battle,
"Slay not, oh Marko, thy falcon grey,
"Slay them not, do them no ill!
"Ride onward yet a little while!
"A green lake, girt in woods is there,
"Whose waters cool will slake thy thirst.
"But stir not the waters of the lake!
"For on it sleeps the Evil Vila;
"Woe to the hero who awakes her,
"Or clouds the mirror of her lake!
"A heavy toll exacts the Vila—
"From the hero his eyes of black,
"And the four feet of his trusty steed!"
Marko listens, but little he recks,
Forward he rides a little farther.
The Vila slumbers on the lake,
Slumbers beneath the willows' shade,
By the dense willow bush she slumbers,
And the lake waters lap her feet.
Into the flood spurs Marko his Sharatz:
Both drink their fill and quench their thirst,
Then singing on his way he rides.
Wakes in swift fury the Evil Vila,

And hisses like a poisonous dragon.
Swift come the serpents of her breast,
Swift too the beasts that haunt the wood.
She mounts a stag of seven summers ;
A serpent serves her as a bit,
Two other serpents as the reins,
And with the fourth she flogs her steed.
Fierce on the track of Marko she follows,
And from afar she screams aloud :
“ Listen, oh hero, look round an instant,
“ And then thou mayst follow thy path in peace ! ”
Marko obeys the Vila's word,
But first he presses his cap on his brow,
As he turns back to gaze on her.
Swiftly draws nigh the mighty Vila,
Monarch of all the mountain woods,
Down from the stag she swiftly springs,
Leaving him in the serpent's grasp.
Swift to her bow six bolts she has fitted.
And Marko too from his Sharatz springs,
With his thick bearskin fends off the bolts,
Fends off, and swiftly snaps them asunder.
In fury advances the woodland queen,
Round his silk girdle her arm she winds,
Striving to crush him to the earth.
Sorely pressed is Marko Kraljević—
Shoulder to shoulder hero and heroine,
All through a summer morn they wrestle,
Till a white foam covers the Vila,
And Marko a black foam, flaked with blood.
Neither can overcome the other.
And Marko's knees are shaking beneath him,
And loudly laughs in her glee the Vila,
When all the clear sky gleams with light,
As though the heavens were opening.
With a deep groan he raised his eyes :
“ Oh sister-Vila, oh white cloud-dweller,
“ Why didst thou swear to me falsely of old
“ That never in need, thou wouldst desert me ?
“ Oh aid me now, or aid me never ! ”

Then answered his sister of the clouds :
 " Did I not tell thee, oh blood-brother Marko,
 " Forward to ride, but to give good heed,
 " To drink of the lake, but to stir not its waters,
 " Not to rouse from sleep the Woodland Queen ?
 " For a heavy toll exacts the Vila—
 " From the hero his eyes of black
 " And the four feet of his trusty steed.
 " Shameful it is, two fighting one,
 " Yet tell me where are thy hidden daggers ? "
 Up to the skies looks the Evil Vila,
 Marvelling who is speaking to Marko.
 Is she mad ? Has a serpent stung her ?
 Into the clear blue heaven she gapes,
 And, gaping, slackens from Marko's shoulder.
 Swiftly he grasps his hidden weapon,
 Deep in her vitals he drives it home.
 In fury the Vila curses him loudly :
 " Marko, Marko, wonders await thee.
 " Blind of both eyes shalt thou be, oh Marko,
 " Out of the white world shalt thou vanish,
 " Vanish away, ere Death comes on thee.
 " Why dost thou slay the mighty Vila,
 " Queen of the mountain and woodland lake,
 " Where nest the swans and the gold-winged ducks,
 " Where the wolf shepherds the white-fleeced lambs,
 " Where the stag yields himself to the rider ? "
 Marko listens, but little he recks.
 Flashes his sabre above the stag,
 Frees his head from the venom'd snakes,
 Leaves him to plunge at will through the forest.
 Marko flings himself into the saddle,
 Into the saddle of trusty Sharatz.
 While the Vila lies in her agony,
 Marko rides through the forest singing :
 " Greeting to him whose friend is true,
 " Ready to guard and care for him !
 " Wanderer, freely pass through the forest,
 " Paying no toll while Marko liveth ! "

THE BATTLE OF MIŠAR.

(1806)

Flying there come two coal-black ravens
From afar, from the plain of Mišar,
From the white fortress of Sabač flying.
Bloody were their beaks to the very eyes,
Bloody were their claws to the very knees,
And they flew through all the rich Mačva land
They waded through the Drina's waves,
And through time-honoured Bosnia rode they.
On the fell borderland they lighted,
On Vakuf the accursed they lighted—
On the tower of the Captain Kulin.
As they lighted, they hoarsely croaked.
Out of the tower stepped Kulin's wife,
Out of the tower and spake to them:—
“ O ye ravens, my brothers in God
“ Have ye long left the lower Frontiers
“ And the widespread plain of Mišar
“ And of Sabac the shining fortress?
“ Didst thou see there the Turkish army
“ Encamped around the white town of Šabac?
“ And in the army the Turkish leaders?
“ Didst thou see there my lord and master?
“ Didst thou see him, Kulin the captain,
“ Who is the head of a hundred thousand,
“ And who has pledged his word to the Sultan,
“ That he will reduce the Serbian land
“ And from the peasant exact the poll tax;
“ That he will capture George the Black,
“ And to the Sultan alive will send him;
“ That he will hew down Serbia's leaders,

" Who were the first to raise this tumult ?
 " Has he yet sent Black George to the Sultan ?
 " Is Jakob not yet at the stake impaled ?
 " Has Luko not yet died on the gallows ?
 " Is Janko not yet burned to death ?
 " Has he felled Cupić with the sword,
 " And Miloš torn asunder with horses ?
 " Is the land of the Serb once more at peace ?
 " When is my lord, my Kulin returning ?
 " Does he still lead the proud Bosnian army ?
 " Will his coming be now or soon ?
 " Is he driving before him the cattle of Mačva ?
 " Does he bring me Serbian women as slaves,
 " To serve me truly in court and house ?
 " Tell me ! When will my lord arrive ?
 " When is he coming, that I may prepare ? "

Then answered her the coal-black ravens :
 " Noble lady, O wife of Kulin
 " Would we could bring thee better tidings
 " But as it befell, our tale must be.
 " We have come from the borderland
 " Close by Šabac, the shining fortress ;
 " From the wide plain of Mišar we come.
 " There we saw the great Turkish army,
 " Round about Šabac the shining fortress,
 " There too we saw thy lord and master,
 " Kulin, the Captain of this land.
 " There too we saw Black George arrayed ;
 " On the wide plain of Mišar we saw him.
 " Fifteen thousand Serbs were with him,
 " And with thy lord, Kulin the Captain
 " A hundred thousand Turks were massed.
 " Aye, all that passed our eyes have seen it,
 " How the armies met in battle's shock,
 " On the wide plain of Mišar marshalled—
 " The Serbs on the one hand the Turks against them
 " Leading the Serbs was George Petrović,
 " Leading the Turks was the Captain Kulin.

“ The Serbian army o’ercame the Turkish.
“ Kulin the Captain fell on the field,
“ Black George it was who slew him there.
“ With him fell thirty thousand Turks
“ And all the chiefs of the Turkish host.
“ All the noblest of the noble
“ From rocky Bosnia high in honour,
“ Kulin the captain turns not homeward
“ Nor shall he ever homeward turn.
“ Wait not for him, go not to meet him
“ Rear thy son for war and battle.
“ Never can Serbia surrender.”

SARAJEVO.

(A SERB FOLKSONG.)

Sarajevo, whence comes thy gloom ?
Tell me, has fire consuméd thee ?
Or has the flood engulfed thy streets ?
Or has the plague laid hold on thee ? ”

Softly Sarajevo gives answer :—

“ Had fire consuméd me so sore,
“ My shining courts would rise again.
“ Had the fierce flood engulfed my streets,
“ My markets would be cleansed and fresh.
“ But plague has laid her murderous hand,
“ Her murderous hand on young and old,
“ And those I love, has torn apart.”

WHO FARES BEST?

(A SERBIAN FOLKSONG.)

By the seashore the golden lemon boasts,

“None fares so well to-day as I.”

The green apple hears it, on the appletree :

“Vain is thy boast, o golden lemon,

“None fares so well to-day as I.”

The fresh meadow hears it, still unmown,

“Vain is thy boast, green apple on the bough,

“None fares so well to-day as I.”

The maiden hears it too, she, still unkissed :

“Vain is thy boast, o meadow still unmown,

“None fares so well to-day as I.”

The boy too hears it, he, still unbetrothed :

“Vain is your boast, vain, one and all ;

“For surely none fares as I do to-day.

“O golden lemon on the shore, to-day I pluck thee,

“O apple green upon the bough, to-day I break thee.

“O meadow still unmown, to-day I mow thee,

“O maiden still unkissed, to-day I kiss thee.”

WIDOW AND MAIDEN.

(A BOSNIAN SERB FOLKSONG.)

Above Sarajevo a falcon soars
Seeking a place of cool and rest,
And in Sarajevo he finds a pine,
And in its shade a fount of waters cool,
And on their brink the widowed hyacinth
And the sweet-scented, virgin rose.
The falcon pondered well within his mind,
Which should he kiss, the widowed hyacinth
Or the sweet-scented, virgin rose?
But as he pondered, came the swift resolve,
And softly thus he whispered to himself:
"Gold is more worth, e'en after it is worn,
"Than silver, e'en when it is newly coined."
He spake, and kissed the widowed hyacinth.
In fury cried the virgin rose:
"Sarajevo, may ill befall thee!
"For 'twas with thee the evil use began
"That striplings should pay court to widowed breasts,
"And hoary headed sires to lovely maids."

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